

THE ARK LOST AND RETURNED

BIBLE TEXT : I Samuel 4:1-18; 5:1-5; 6:1-3, 7-15, 19, 20

LESSON 201 Senior Course

MEMORY VERSE: "The LORD is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him" (Habakkuk 2:20).

BIBLE TEXT in King James Version

1 Samuel 4:1-18

¹ And the word of Samuel came to all Israel. Now Israel went out against the Philistines to battle, and pitched beside Ebenezer: and the Philistines pitched in Aphek.

² And the Philistines put themselves in array against Israel: and when they joined battle, Israel was smitten before the Philistines: and they slew of the army in the field about four thousand men.

³ And when the people were come into the camp, the elders of Israel said, Wherefore hath the LORD smitten us to day before the Philistines? Let us fetch the ark of the covenant of the LORD out of Shiloh unto us, that, when it cometh among us, it may save us out of the hand of our enemies.

⁴ So the people sent to Shiloh, that they might bring from thence the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts, which dwelleth *between* the cherubims: and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, *were* there with the ark of the covenant of God.

⁵ And when the ark of the covenant of the LORD came into the camp, all Israel shouted with a great shout, so that the earth rang again.

⁶ And when the Philistines heard the noise of the shout, they said, What *meaneth* the noise of this great shout in the camp of the Hebrews? And they understood that the ark of the LORD was come into the camp.

⁷ And the Philistines were afraid, for they said, God is come into the camp. And they said, Woe unto us! for there hath not been such a

BIBLE REFERENCES:

I Judgment upon Israel

1 The Philistines slew 4,000 men when the Children of Israel tried to overthrow the yoke of bondage, I Samuel 4:1, 2;

Joshua 7:4-5

⁴ So there went up thither of the people about three thousand men: and they fled before the men of Ai

⁵ And the men of Ai smote of them about thirty and six men: for they chased them *from* before the gate *even* unto Shebarim, and smote them in the going down: wherefore the hearts of the people melted, and became as water.

Psalms 44:9-10

⁹ But thou hast cast off, and put us to shame; and goest not forth with our armies.

¹⁰ Thou makest us to turn back from the enemy: and they which hate us spoil for themselves.

2 The elders of Israel inquired for the reason of defeat, I Samuel 4:3;

Joshua 7:6-12

⁶ And Joshua rent his clothes, and fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of the LORD until the eventide, he and the elders of Israel, and put dust upon their heads.

⁷ And Joshua said, Alas, O Lord GOD, wherefore hast thou at all brought this people over Jordan, to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us? would to God we had been content, and dwelt on the other side Jordan!

⁸ O Lord, what shall I say, when Israel turneth their backs before their enemies!

⁹ For the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land shall hear *of it*, and shall environ us round, and cut off our name from the earth: and what wilt thou do unto thy great name?

¹⁰ And the LORD said unto Joshua, Get thee up; wherefore liest thou thus upon thy face?

¹¹ Israel hath sinned, and they have also transgressed my covenant which I commanded them: for they have even taken of the accursed thing, and have also stolen, and dissembled also, and they have put *it* even among their own stuff.

¹² Therefore the children of Israel could not stand before their enemies, *but* turned *their* backs before their enemies, because they were accursed: neither will I be with you any more, except ye destroy the accursed from among you.

3 The Ark of God was brought into the camp, I Samuel 4:4, 5

4 The Philistines rallied their forces and again defeated Israel, I Samuel 4:6-10

II Israel's Crushing Loss

1 The Ark of God was taken, and Eli's sons were slain, I Samuel 4:11;

Psalms 78:59-64

⁵⁹ When God heard *this*, he was wroth, and greatly abhorred Israel:

⁶⁰ So that he forsook the tabernacle of Shiloh, the tent *which* he placed among men;

⁶¹ And delivered his strength into captivity, and his glory into the enemy's hand.

thing heretofore.

⁸ Woe unto us! who shall deliver us out of the hand of these mighty Gods? these *are* the Gods that smote the Egyptians with all the plagues in the wilderness.

⁹ Be strong, and quit yourselves like men, O ye Philistines, that ye be not servants unto the Hebrews, as they have been to you: quit yourselves like men, and fight.

¹⁰ And the Philistines fought, and Israel was smitten, and they fled every man into his tent: and there was a very great slaughter; for there fell of Israel thirty thousand footmen.

¹¹ And the ark of God was taken; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were slain.

¹² And there ran a man of Benjamin out of the army, and came to Shiloh the same day with his clothes rent, and with earth upon his head.

¹³ And when he came, lo, Eli sat upon a seat by the wayside watching: for his heart trembled for the ark of God. And when the man came into the city, and told *it*, all the city cried out.

¹⁴ And when Eli heard the noise of the crying, he said, What *meaneth* the noise of this tumult? And the man came in hastily, and told Eli.

¹⁵ Now Eli was ninety and eight years old; and his eyes were dim, that he could not see.

¹⁶ And the man said unto Eli, I *am* he that came out of the army, and I fled to day out of the army. And he said, What is there done, my son?

¹⁷ And the messenger answered and said, Israel is fled before the Philistines, and there hath been also a great slaughter among the people, and thy two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God is taken.

¹⁸ And it came to pass, when he made mention of the ark of God,

⁶² He gave his people over also unto the sword; and was wroth with his inheritance.

⁶³ The fire consumed their young men; and their maidens were not given to marriage.

⁶⁴ Their priests fell by the sword; and their widows made no lamentation.

2 The report of disaster was brought to Shiloh, I Samuel 4:12, 13

3 When Eli heard that the Ark of God had been captured, he fell from his seat and died, I Samuel 4:14-18

III God's Care for the Ark, and Its Return

1 The Philistines' idol fell before the Ark, I Samuel 5:1-5; Isaiah 19:1

2 After seven months of great affliction, the Philistines decided to send the Ark back to Israel, I Samuel 6:1-3

3 A test was made to determine whether God's hand had been in the affliction upon the Philistines, I Samuel 6:7-12

4 The people of Israel received their Ark with rejoicing, I Samuel 6:13-15

5 The men of Beth-shemesh looked into the Ark and were smitten by the Lord, I Samuel 6:19, 20;

2 Samuel 6:6-7

⁶ And when they came to Nachon's threshingfloor, Uzzah put forth *his hand* to the ark of God, and took hold of it; for the oxen shook *it*.

⁷ And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah; and God smote him there for *his error*; and there he died by the ark of God.

NOTES:

Servitude and Its Cause

"The word of Samuel came to all Israel." This word was in all probability the revelation from God to Samuel that Eli's house would be judged because sin and iniquity were found there (**1 Samuel 3:11-14** ¹¹ And the LORD said to Samuel, Behold, I will do a thing in Israel, at which both the ears of every one that heareth it shall tingle. ¹² In that day I will perform against Eli all *things* which I have spoken concerning his house: when I begin, I will also make an end. ¹³ For I have told him that I will judge his house for ever for the iniquity which he knoweth; because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not. ¹⁴ And therefore I have sworn unto the house of Eli, that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be purged with sacrifice nor offering for ever). Hophni and Phinehas, Eli's sons, who were acting as priests in their father's place, knew not the Lord; and made themselves very vile. The Lord said that He would bring about a change in the priesthood (**1 Samuel 2:35** ³⁵ And I will raise me up a faithful priest, *that shall do according to that which is in mine heart and in my mind*: and I will build him a sure house; and he shall walk before mine anointed for ever), and events moved swiftly to bring about this change.

The Children of Israel had been a long time under the domination of the Philistines. No doubt the yoke of servitude was oppressive, for the Philistines admitted in a measure that their rule over Israel had been rigorous (**1 Samuel 4:9** ⁹ Be strong, and quit yourselves like men, O ye Philistines, that ye be not servants unto the Hebrews, as they have been to you: quit yourselves like men, and fight). In any wise, the army of the Children of Israel attempted to overthrow the Philistines' control of their land. The battle was put in array with high expectations, but the Israelites soon found themselves put to the worse before their enemy. Four thousand of their men were left dead on the field of battle. The question arose that evening in the camp of Israel, "Wherefore bath

that he fell from off the seat backward by the side of the gate, and his neck brake, and he died: for he was an old man, and heavy. And he had judged Israel forty years.

1 Samuel 5:1-5

¹ And the Philistines took the ark of God, and brought it from Ebenezer unto Ashdod.

² When the Philistines took the ark of God, they brought it into the house of Dagon, and set it by Dagon.

³ And when they of Ashdod arose early on the morrow, behold, Dagon *was* fallen upon his face to the earth before the ark of the LORD. And they took Dagon, and set him in his place again.

⁴ And when they arose early on the morrow morning, behold, Dagon *was* fallen upon his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD; and the head of Dagon and both the palms of his hands *were* cut off upon the threshold; only *the stump of Dagon* was left to him.

⁵ Therefore neither the priests of Dagon, nor any that come into Dagon's house, tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod unto this day.

1 Samuel 6:1-3

¹ And the ark of the LORD was in the country of the Philistines seven months.

² And the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners, saying, What shall we do to the ark of the LORD? tell us wherewith we shall send it to his place.

³ And they said, If ye send away the ark of the God of Israel, send it not empty; but in any wise return him a trespass offering: then ye shall be healed, and it shall be known to you why his hand is not removed from you.

the LORD smitten us to day before the Philistines?" There was a reason: the Lord had departed from the Children of Israel because they had sinned against Him.

Wrong Procedure

The elders of Israel proposed a remedy for their defeat, and the people seemed to endorse the suggestion. "Let us fetch the ark of the covenant of the LORD out of Shiloh unto us, that, when it cometh among us, it may save us out of the hand of our enemies." The people knew that the Lord was not fighting for them, that He had allowed them to be smitten by their enemies. However, they did not seek in the right way to win His favor once more. The elders of Israel seemed to think that if they had the emblem of God with them, they would be assured of His presence; whereas, the sins of the priest's and the people had caused God to withdraw Himself entirely. When God heard of their unfaithfulness, "he was wroth, and greatly abhorred Israel: so that he forsook the tabernacle of Shiloh, the tent which he placed among men" (Psalm 78:59, 60).

There is only one thing, sin, that causes God to turn His face away from His people. The only way to win God's favor, once sin has been committed, is to repent of that sin and return to God, seeking His mercy. This is the action that the Children of Israel should have taken when they found themselves defeated before the enemy. They had an example to follow in the action that Joshua took when the Israelites were defeated at Ai. He went down upon his face before God in humiliation until the source of the trouble was revealed. As soon as the accursed thing and sin were removed from the camp, God could again visit His people with victory. God is ever merciful to the people who come with contrition and repentance, but He will judge those who persist in their sins against Him.

No Power in Emblems

The Children of Israel at this time were little better than the heathen around about them. They seemed to think that the sacred things of God could be used as a sort of charm to induce God to help their cause, much as the heathen superstitiously used their fetishes and talismans to invoke the aid of their gods. The fact that the Ark of the Covenant was brought into the camp was not a guaranty that the presence of the Lord would disregard the sins of the people and come with the Ark. On the contrary, the people who misuse the sacred and holy things of *God and the Gospel heap unto themselves the greater condemnation.

The days in which we live are called enlightened days, but millions of people have not progressed beyond similar false suppositions. Countless people have a copy of the Bible in their homes as a sort of good-luck charm. They seem to think that keeping the Word of God on hand will ward off evil. The Bible may be relegated to the attic, or be covered by the dust of neglect; but that is not considered by them to make any difference. Other people feel that attending a church service once or twice a year will keep the God of the universe appeased. The remainder of the year they do as their evil heart dictates. Still others will attend church service to improve their business relations, or to improve their standing in the community. God does not look with any degree of favor upon these types of worshipers. He seeks the class of men who will worship Him in spirit and in truth.

Right and Wrong

When the Ark of the Covenant was brought into the camp, the army of Israel gave a great shout, so that the earth rang again. It was probably a frenzied shout of an uncertain army

1 Samuel 6:7-15

⁷ Now therefore make a new cart, and take two milch kine, on which there hath come no yoke, and tie the kine to the cart, and bring their calves home from them:

⁸ And take the ark of the LORD, and lay it upon the cart; and put the jewels of gold, which ye return him *for* a trespass offering, in a coffer by the side thereof; and send it away, that it may go.

⁹ And see, if it goeth up by the way of his own coast to Bethshemesh, *then* he hath done us this great evil: but if not, then we shall know that *it is* not his hand *that* smote us: it *was* a chance *that* happened to us.

¹⁰ And the men did so; and took two milch kine, and tied them to the cart, and shut up their calves at home:

¹¹ And they laid the ark of the LORD upon the cart, and the coffer with the mice of gold and the images of their emerods.

¹² And the kine took the straight way to the way of Bethshemesh, *and* went along the highway, *lowing* as they went, and turned not aside *to* the right hand or *to* the left; and the lords of the Philistines went after them unto the border of Bethshemesh.

¹³ And *they of* Bethshemesh *were* reaping their wheat harvest in the valley: and they lifted up their eyes, and saw the ark, and rejoiced to see *it*.

¹⁴ And the cart came into the field of Joshua, a Bethshemite, and stood there, where *there was* a great stone: and they clave the wood of the cart, and offered the kine a burnt offering unto the LORD.

¹⁵ And the Levites took down the ark of the LORD, and the coffer that *was* with it, wherein the jewels of gold *were*, and put *them*

trying to work up its courage, rather than the victorious shout of an army whose faith and trust in God were complete. The Ark had been taken into battle before, but not in the manner in which the Children of Israel tried to use it on this occasion. During the battle of Jericho the Ark had led the army in its march around those walls for six days; and on the seventh day it had been at the head of the procession on the seven circumferential marches. However, there had been no shouting in that battle until the last day and the last march around the walls. Also, the Ark had been carefully prepared for its work; it had been completely wrapped in the folds of the Tabernacle, so that no man looked upon its structure. Only the high priest should enter where that sacred Ark was, and that only once a year — on the Day of Atonement; but here the whole army of Israel stood and gazed. Instead of shouting, they should have mourned at the turn of events!

Hold Fast

Those who lightly esteem God's blessings will soon have those blessings taken away from their lives. The army of Israel did not continue in possession of the Ark of God very long, once they wrested it from its rightful place. The Philistines heard the noise of the shout that the Children of Israel made; they rallied their forces for the hard fight ahead, and won the victory. They captured the Ark as a prize of war and they slew 30,000 men of the army of Israel. Hophni and Phinehas, the sons of Eli, died also, according to the word that the prophet had spoken. The army of Israel left the field in total disgrace, each man fleeing for his life. It was a sad day for the people who called themselves the children of God, but they had to lay the blame at their own door. Israel knew beforehand the results of sin. "The LORD shall cause thee to be smitten before thine enemies: thou shalt go out one way against them, and flee seven ways before them" (Deuteronomy 28:25).

"Hold that fast which them hast, that no man take thy crown" (Revelation 3:11). God expects and requires that men use rightly the things of God that have been placed in their trust, or God will remove those things. Jesus illustrated this fact with the parable of the servant who received the one talent, who went and hid his lord's money in the earth. The servant knew what should have been done with that money, but he was reluctant to put forth the effort. When the lord returned from his journey and found the talent unappreciated and unused, the command went forth, "Take therefore the talent from him" (Matthew 25:28). He lost not only the talent, but he lost all rewards and his life as well.

The Ark of the Covenant contained the Word of God. When the Children of Israel misused the Ark, they suffered its loss. The Bible today is the best-selling publication in the world, but how terribly the Word of God is being mistreated and misused! Men should take heed, because the Word declares that the day will come when that Word will be taken out of the world. "Behold, the days come, saith the Lord GOD, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD: and they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the LORD, and shall not find it" (Amos 8:11, 12).

Message of Disaster

The message of the disastrous defeat soon reached the city of Shiloh. Eli sat by the wayside, waiting to hear the results of the battle, for his heart trembled for the Ark of God. The messenger

on the great stone: and the men of Bethshemesh offered burnt offerings and sacrificed sacrifices the same day unto the LORD.

1 Samuel 6:19-20

¹⁹ And he smote the men of Bethshemesh, because they had looked into the ark of the LORD, even he smote of the people fifty thousand and threescore and ten men: and the people lamented, because the LORD had smitten *many* of the people with a great slaughter.

²⁰ And the men of Bethshemesh said, Who is able to stand before this holy LORD God? and to whom shall he go up from us?

QUESTIONS

- 1 Why were the Children of Israel smitten before the Philistines?
- 2 Should the Ark of God have been brought into the battle?
- 3 What happened when the second battle was fought?
- 4 What did the Philistines do with the Ark of God?
- 5 What persuaded the Philistines to send the Ark back to the land of Israel?
- 6 How was the Ark of God sent back?
- 7 In what way did the Philistines prove whether it was God or not who had caused their suffering?
- 8 Were the Children of Israel happy to receive their Ark?
- 9 Why did the Lord find it necessary to smite some

seemed to pass by the old priest, perhaps on purpose, to avoid telling the sad news that awaited him. When the man came into the city and told the story of ignominious defeat, the people of the city cried out. Eli heard the cry and inquired the reason. The messenger came hastily to Eli, then, and told the events of the day. The message was brief, but each sentence added to the grief of the hearer, each woe mounting in height. Eli could bear the message, including the death of his two sons, until the last exclamation was reached, "The ark of God is taken"; then his courage failed him. He fell off the seat backward; and being a very old man and heavy, his neck was broken and he died.

God's Witness

God has not left Himself without witness. When the Children of Israel failed to glorify God through the life they lived, then God received glory through other means. The Philistines regarded the God of Israel as just another god, but they soon found that He was the powerful God of the universe. They took the Ark that had been captured, and placed it beside their god, Dagon, in his temple. The next morning the Philistines found Dagon prostrate upon the earth before the Ark of God. Thinking that this was a mischance, the Philistines restored their god to his place; but upon investigation the following morning, they found Dagon on his face on the ground once again. This time only his stump was left; his hands and his head had been cut off.

The hand of the Lord was heavy upon the Philistines. Everywhere the Ark was carried the men were smitten with a very peculiar plague, until they began to cry out for deliverance. After seven months of suffering, the people called for their priests and diviners to ask what could be done to send the Ark of God back to its place. A method was devised, and a test was made to determine if the Lord had actually caused all this distress. "Now therefore make a new cart, and take two mulch kine, on which there hath come no yoke, and tie the kine to the cart, and bring their calves home from them: and take the ark of the LORD, and lay it upon the cart; ... and send it away, that it may go. And see, if it goeth up by the way of his own coast to Beth-shemesh, then he hath done us this great evil: but if not, then we shall know that it is not his hand that smote us; it was a chance that happened to us" (1 Samuel 6:7-9).

The kine took the straight way to the way of Beth-shemesh, lowing as they went. They turned not aside to the right hand or to the left. Thus the God of Israel proved Himself to the Philistines in a way that could not be questioned. Thus will God prove Himself to all men, if they will give Him an honest chance.